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FRANK SWINNERTON

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*Personal Sketches*

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BY FRANK SWINNERTON

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SEPTEMBER

SHOPS AND HOUSES

NOCTURNE

THE CHASTE WIFE

ON THE STAIRCASE

THE HAPPY FAMILY

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GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

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Frank Swinerton

R.J. SWAN, 1919.



# FRANK SWINNERTON

## *Personal Sketches*

by

ARNOLD BENNETT  
H. G. WELLS  
GRANT M. OVERTON

*Together with Notes  
and Comments on the Novels of  
Frank Swinnerton*

NEW  YORK  
GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

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# FRANK SWINNERTON

## *A Personal Sketch*

By ARNOLD BENNETT

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**T**HERE was nothing in the slightest degree romantic or marvellous in my first meeting with Frank Swinnerton. It all happened in the most ordinary way. One day, perhaps eight or nine years ago, I received a novel entitled *The Casement*. I was then living in a very mediæval *pavilion* in an old quarter of Paris. I remember quite well that an American friend came for Christmas Eve dinner in this fastness or fortress. I had a new and wondrous coffee-machine of which I was proud, and in which I made the coffee with my own hands. On that night I put the ground coffee in the wrong end of the machine, with the result that finally the precious liquid inundated the whole of the sideboard instead of reaching the cups; also the mediæval oil-lamps were left with the wicks too high in the drawing-room, so that when we returned to the drawing-room after mopping up the coffee, every object therein was evenly covered with a coat of greasy black soot, and

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the opaque atmosphere scorched the eyes and parched the throat.

To return to *The Casement*. The book was accompanied by a short, rather curt note from the author, Frank Swinnerton, politely indicating that if I cared to read it he would be glad, and implying that if I didn't care to read it, he should endeavor still to survive. I would quote the letter, but I cannot find it—no doubt for the reason that all my correspondence is carefully filed on the most modern filing system. I did not read *The Casement* for a long time. Why should I consecrate three irrecoverable hours or so to the work of a man as to whom I had no credentials? Why should I thus introduce foreign matter into the delicate cogwheels of my programme of reading? However, after a delay of weeks, heaven in its deep wisdom inspired me with a caprice to pick up the volume.

I had read, without fatigue but on the other hand without passionate eagerness, about a hundred pages before the thought suddenly occurred to me: "I do not remember having yet come across one single ready-made phrase in this story." Such was my

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first definable thought concerning Frank Swinnerton. I hate ready-made phrases, which in my view—and in that of Schopenhauer—are the sure mark of a mediocre writer. I began to be interested. I soon said to myself: "This fellow has a distinguished style." I then perceived that the character-drawing was both subtle and original, the atmosphere delicious, and the movement of the tale very original, too. The novel stirred me—not by its powerfulness, for it did not set out to be powerful—but by its individuality and distinction. I thereupon wrote to Frank Swinnerton. I forget entirely what I said. But I know that I decided that I must meet him.

When I came to London, considerably later, I took measures to meet him, at the Authors' Club. He proved to be young; I daresay twenty-four or twenty-five—medium height, medium looks, medium clothes, somewhat reddish hair, and lively eyes. If I had seen him in a motorbus I should never have said: "A remarkable chap,"—no more than if I had seen myself in a motorbus. My impressions of the interview were rather like my impressions of the book; at first some-

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what negative, and only very slowly becoming positive. He was reserved, as became a young author; I was reserved, as became an older author; we were both reserved, as became Englishmen. Our views on the only important thing in the world—that is to say, fiction—agreed, not completely, but in the main; it would never have done for us to agree completely. I was as much pleased by what he didn't say as by what he said; quite as much by the indications of the stock inside the shop as by the display in the window. The interview came to a calm close. My knowledge of him acquired from it amounted to this, that he held decided and righteous views upon literature, that his heart was not on his sleeve, and that he worked in a publisher's office during the day and wrote for himself in the evenings.

Then I saw no more of Swinnerton for a relatively long period. I read other books of his. I read *The Young Idea*, and *The Happy Family*, and, I think, his critical work on George Gissing. *The Happy Family* marked a new stage in his development. It has some really piquant scenes, and it revealed that minute knowledge of middle-class life in the

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nearer suburbs of London, and that disturbing insight into the hearts and brains of quite unfashionable girls, which are two of his principal gifts. I read a sketch of his of a commonplace crowd walking round a bandstand which brought me to a real decision as to his qualities. The thing was like life, and it was bathed in poetry.

Our acquaintance proceeded slowly, and I must be allowed to assert that the initiative which pushed it forward was mine. It made a jump when he spent a week-end in the Thames Estuary on my yacht. If any reader has a curiosity to know what my yacht is not like, he should read the striking yacht chapter in *Nocturne*. I am convinced that Swinnerton evolved the yacht in *Nocturne* from my yacht; but he ennobled, magnified, decorated, enriched and bejewelled it till honestly I could not recognize my wretched vessel. The yacht in *Nocturne* is the yacht I want, ought to have, and never shall have. I envy him the yacht in *Nocturne*, and my envy takes a malicious pleasure in pointing out a mistake in the glowing scene. He anchors his yacht in the middle of the Thames—as if the tyrannic authorities of the Port of London



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would ever allow a yacht, or any other craft, to anchor in midstream!

After the brief cruise our friendship grew rapidly. I now know Swinnerton—probably as well as any man knows him; I have penetrated into the interior of the shop. He has done several things since I first knew him—rounded the corner of thirty, grown a beard, under the orders of a doctor, and physically matured. Indeed he looks decidedly stronger than in fact he is—he was never able to pass the medical examination for the army. He is still in the business of publishing, being one of the principal personages in the ancient and well-tried firm of Chatto and Windus, the English publishers of Swinburne and Mark Twain. He reads manuscripts, including his own—and including mine. He refuses manuscripts, though he did accept one of mine. He tells authors what they ought to do and ought not to do. He is marvellously and terribly particular and fussy about the format of the books issued by his firm. Questions as to fonts of type, width of margins, disposition of title-pages, tint and texture of bindings really do interest him. And misprints—especially when he has read the proofs himself—give him neuralgia and even



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worse afflictions. Indeed he is the ideal publisher for an author.

Nevertheless, publishing is only a side-line of his. He still writes for himself in the evenings and at week-ends—the office never sees him on Saturdays. Among the chief literary events of nineteen seventeen was *Nocturne*, which he wrote in the evenings and at week-ends. It is a short book, but the time in which he wrote it was even shorter. He had scarcely begun it when it was finished. In regard to the result I am prepared to say to the judicious reader unacquainted with Swinnerton's work, "Read *Nocturne*",—and to stand or fall, and to let him stand or fall, by the result. *Nocturne* moved H. G. Wells to an extraordinary enthusiasm, so much so that Wells had to write to the morning papers about it. And I remember Wells saying to me: "You know, Arnold, he achieves a perfection in *Nocturne* that you and I never get within streets of." A hard saying to pass between two hardened pilgrims whose combined years total over a century; but justified. You can say what you like about *Nocturne*, but you cannot say that on its own scale it is

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not perfect, consummate. At least, I cannot.

Besides being no mean publisher and a novelist who has produced several fine and one perfect novel, Frank Swinnerton has other gifts. He is a surpassingly good raconteur. By which I do not signify that the man who meets Swinnerton for the first, second or third time will infallibly ache with laughter at his remarks. Swinnerton only blossoms in the right atmosphere; he must know exactly where he is; he must be perfectly sure of his environment, before the flower uncloses. And he merely relates what he has seen, what he has taken part in. The narrations would be naught if he were not the narrator. His effects are helped by the fact that he is an excellent mimic and by his utter realistic mercilessness. But like all first-class realists he is also a romantic, and in his mercilessness there is a mysterious touch of fundamental benevolence—as befits the attitude of one who does not worry because human nature is not something different from what it actually is. Lastly, in this connection, he has superlatively the laugh known as the “infectious laugh.” When he laughs everybody

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laughs, everybody has to laugh. There are men who tell side-splitting tales with the face of an undertaker—for example, Irvin Cobb. There are men who tell side-splitting tales and openly and candidly rollick in them from the first word; and of these latter is Frank Swinnerton. But Frank Swinnerton can be more cruel than Irvin Cobb. Indeed, sometimes, when he is telling a story, his face becomes exactly like the face of Mephistopheles in excellent humour with the world's sinfulness and idiocy.

Swinnerton's other gift is the critical. It has been said that an author cannot be at once a first-class critic and a first-class creative artist. To which absurdity I reply: What about William Dean Howells? And what about Henry James, to name no other names? Anyhow, if Swinnerton excels in fiction he also excels in literary criticism. The fact that the literary editor of *The Manchester Guardian* wrote and asked him to write literary criticism for *The Manchester Guardian* will perhaps convey nothing to the American citizen. But to the Englishman of literary taste and experience it has enormous import. *The Manchester Guardian* publishes the most fas-

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tidious and judicious literary criticism in Britain.

I recall that once when Swinnerton was in my house I had there also a young military officer with a mad passion for letters and a terrific ambition to be an author. The officer gave me a manuscript to read. I handed it over to Swinnerton to read, and then called upon Swinnerton to criticize it in the presence of both of us. "Your friend is very kind," said the officer to me afterwards, "but it was a frightful ordeal."

The book on George Gissing I have already mentioned. But it was Swinnerton's work on R. L. Stevenson that made the trouble in London. It is a destructive work. It is very bland and impartial, and not bereft of laudatory passages, but since its appearance Stevenson's reputation has never been the same. Those who wish to preserve their illusions about the greatness of Stevenson should refrain from reading it. Few recent books of criticism have aroused more hostility than Swinnerton's *Stevenson*. There is a powerful Stevenson cult in England, as there is in America. And in London there are sundry persons who cannot get far into any conver-

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sation without using the phrase, "As dear old R. L. S. used to say." Some of these persons are personages. They rage at the mention of Swinnerton. One of them on a celebrated occasion exclaimed in fury: "Never let me hear that man's name!" This detail alone shows that Swinnerton is a real critic. Sham criticism, however violent,—and Swinnerton is incapable of violence—does not and cannot arouse such passion.



# CONCERNING MR. SWINNERTON

By H. G. WELLS

"But do I see afore me, him as I ever sported with in his time of happy infancy? And may I—*may I?*"

This May I, meant might he shake hands?

—Dickens, *Great Expectations*.

I DO not know why I should be so overpoweringly reminded of the immortal, if at times impossible, Uncle Pumblechook, when I sit down to write a short preface to Mr. Swinnerton's *Nocturne*. Jests come at times out of the backwoods of a writer's mind. It is part of the literary quality that behind the writer there is a sub-writer, making a commentary. This is a comment against which I may reasonably expostulate, but which, nevertheless, I am indisposed to ignore.

The task of introducing a dissimilar writer to a new public has its own peculiar difficulties for the elder hand. I suppose logically a writer should have good words only for his own imitators. For surely he has chosen what he considers to be the best ways. What justification has he for praising attitudes he never adopted and commending methods of treatment from which he has abstained? The reader naturally receives his commendations with suspicion. Is this man, he asks, stricken with penitence in the flower of his middle-age? Has he but just discovered how good are the results that the other game, the **game** he has never played, can

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give? Or has he been disconcerted by the criticism of the Young? The fear of the Young is the beginning of his wisdom. Is he taking this alien-spirited work by the hand simply to say defensively and vainly, "I assure you, indeed, I am *not* an old foggy; I quite understand it." (There it is, I fancy, that the Pumblechook quotation creeps in.) To all of which suspicions, enquiries and objections, I will quote, tritely but conclusively, "In my Father's house are many mansions," or in the words of Mr. Kipling:

There are five and forty ways  
Of composing tribal lays,  
And every blessed one of them is right.

Indeed, now that I come to think it over, I have never in all my life read a writer of closely kindred method to my own that I have greatly admired; the confessed imitators give me all the discomfort without the relieving admission of caricature; the parallel instances I have always wanted to rewrite; while on the other hand for many totally dissimilar workers I have had quite involuntary admirations. It is not merely that I do not so clearly see how they are doing it, though that may certainly be a help; it is far more a matter of taste. As a writer I belong to one school and as a reader to another—as a man may like to make optical instruments and collect old china. Swift, Sterne, Jane Austen,



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Thackeray, and the Dickens of *Bleak House* were the idols of my youthful imitation, but the contemporaries of my early praises were Joseph Conrad, W. H. Hudson, and Stephen Crane, all utterly remote from that English tradition.

This much may sound egotistical, and the impatient reader may ask when I am coming to Mr. Swinnerton, to which the only possible answer is that I am coming to Mr. Swinnerton as fast as I can and that all this leads as straightly as possible to a definition of Mr. Swinnerton's position. The science of criticism is still crude in its classification, there are a multitude of different things being done that are all lumped together heavily as novels, they are novels as distinguished from romances, so long as they are dealing with something understood to be real. All that they have in common beyond that is that they agree in exhibiting a sort of story continuum. But some of us are trying to use that story continuum to present ideas in action, others to produce powerful excitements of this sort or that, while again others concentrate upon the giving of life as it is, seen only more intensely. Personally I have no use at all for life as it is except as raw material. It bores me to look at things unless there is also the idea of doing something with them. I should find a holiday, doing nothing amid beautiful scenery, not

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a holiday, but a torture. The contemplative ecstasy of the saints would be hell to me. In the—I forget exactly how many—books I have written, it is always about life being altered I write, or about people developing schemes for altering life. And I have never once “presented” life. My apparently most objective books are criticisms and incitements to change. Such a writer as Mr. Swinnerton, on the contrary, sees life and renders it with a steadiness and detachment and patience quite foreign to my disposition. He has no underlying motive. He sees and tells. His aim is the attainment of that beauty which comes with exquisite presentation. Seen through his art, life is seen as one sees things through a crystal lens, more intensely, more completed, and with less turbidity. There the business begins and ends for him. He does not want you or anyone to do anything.

Mr. Swinnerton is not alone among recent writers in this clear detached objectivity. But Mr. Swinnerton, like Mr. James Joyce, does not repudiate the depths for the sake of the surface. His people are not splashes of appearance, but living minds. Jenny and Emmy in this book are realities inside and out; they are imaginative creatures so complete that one can think with ease of Jenny ten years hence or of Emmy as a baby. The fickle Alf is one of the most perfect Cockneys—a type so easy to caricature and so hard to get true—in fiction. If there exists a better writing of vulgar lovemaking, so base, so honest, so touchingly mean and so touch-

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ingly full of the craving for happiness than this, I do not know of it. Only a novelist who has had his troubles can understand fully what a dance among china cups, what a skating over thin ice, what a tight-rope performance is achieved in this astounding chapter. A false note, one fatal line, would have ruined it all. On the one hand lay brutality; a hundred imitative louts could have written a similar chapter brutally, with the soul left out, we have loads of such "strong stuff" and it is nothing; on the other side was the still more dreadful fall into sentimentality, the tear of conscious tenderness, the redeeming glimpse of "better things" in Alf or Emmy that could at one stroke have converted their reality into a genteel masquerade. The perfection of Alf and Emmy is that at no point does a "nature's gentleman" or a "nature's lady" show through and demand our refined sympathy. It is only by comparison with this supreme conversation that the affair of Keith and Jenny seems to fall short of perfection. But that also is at last perfected, I think, by Jenny's final, "Keith . . . Oh, Keith! . . ."

Above these four figures again looms the majestic invention of "Pa." Every reader can appreciate the truth and humor of Pa, but I doubt if anyone without technical experience can realize how the atmosphere is made and completed and rounded off by Pa's beer, Pa's meals, and Pa's accident, how he

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binds the bundle and makes the whole thing one, and what an enviable triumph his achievement is.

But the book is before the reader and I will not enlarge upon its merits further. Mr. Swinnerton has written four or five other novels before this one, but none of them compares with it in quality. His earlier books were strongly influenced by the work of George Gissing; they have something of the same fatigued grayness of texture and little of the same artistic completeness and intense vision of *Nocturne*. He has also made two admirable and very shrewd and thorough studies of the work and lives of Robert Louis Stevenson and George Gissing. Like these two, he has had great experience of illness. He is a young man of so slender a health, so frequently ill, that even for the most sedentary purposes of this war, his country would not take him. It was in connection with his Gissing volume, for which I possessed some material he needed, that I first made his acquaintance. He has had something of Gissing's restricted and gray experiences, but he has nothing of Gissing's almost perverse gloom and despondency. Indeed he is as gay a companion as he is fragile. He is a twinkling addition to any Christmas party, and the twinkle is here in the style. And having sported with him "in his times of happy infancy" I had an intimate and personal satisfaction to my pleasant task of saluting

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this fine work that ends a brilliant apprenticeship and ranks Mr. Swinnerton as Master.

This is a book that will not die. It is perfect, authentic, and alive. Whether a large and immediate popularity will fall to it, I cannot say, but certainly the discriminating will find it and keep it and keep it alive. If Mr. Swinnerton were never to write another word I think he might count on this much of his work living, when many of the more portentous reputations of to-day may have served their purpose in the world and become no more than fading names.



# A CONVERSATION ABOUT FRANK SWINNERTON

By P. M.

MY great-aunt Eunice put down the book with a sniff. "So that's the kind of story young people like nowadays!" she sputtered.

"Why, what's the matter with it?" I asked, much interested to know the effect of this entirely modern novel on one whose standard had always been loyally fixed on *John Halifax, Gentleman*.

"There's nobody in it you can look up to," she complained. "No one stands out more than anyone else. Now which would you rather be yourself, if you had your choice—Emmy or Jenny?"

"That's easy," I answered; "Jenny, of course."

"Well, I wouldn't. Goodness knows, I'd hate to be either of them; but if I had to choose, I'd be Emmy. She at least was sure of a husband, even if he was only a shopkeeper, and she could look ahead to a life of security, whereas Jenny gave up everything for the sake of that disreputable sailor, and I'd take my oath he'd never come back to her, either."

"She had the satisfaction anyway of enjoying one glorious adventure," I defended.

"I don't call it a glorious adventure. That's just the trouble with the story. In my day, the novels had characters who did things and were good and

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noble. You could tell in the first chapter whom to admire and whom to despise. In this story the characters aren't like heroes and heroines in books. They are just like the people you meet in everyday life. It's not the kind of pleasure reading I'm used to."

The book under discussion was *Nocturne*, and I thought that my Aunt Eunice, quite against her will, had paid the author, Mr. Swinnerton, the supreme compliment. My own estimate of the work completely coincided with hers; but my pleasure-pain reactions were so exactly opposite, after reading *Nocturne*, that I felt, instead of homesick longings for Victorian perfection, a surge of unrest to get hold of other books of Mr. Swinnerton's and to find out why they seemed so different from anything else I had ever read.

I am one of those meretricious readers who glide rapidly over the pages of a book and forget. I forget titles and plots and, unless there is something very unusual indeed about the context, only the most leading conversation about the characters can make me remember having read the book at all. So it was no slight prick to my interest in Mr. Swinnerton when, having finished *Nocturne*, I found myself thinking quite warmly and vividly of another book which had strayed into my hands some six years before. This was *The Happy Family*. In spite of the fact that, at the time, Arnold Bennett,



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H. G. Wells, May Sinclair, Granville Barker and various others were putting forth exhaustive studies of the various strata of English middle class family life, this tale had the faculty of simultaneously arousing and satisfying curiosity as none of the other books did. It dealt with the life of the London suburbs and it depicted so ruthlessly the discontents of this unromantic and irritating class of people, whose sordidness, vulgarity, and aping snobbishness are forever doing battle with the fine idealism, the high adventurousness of its own striving youth—that even my volatile gray matter retained the impression. I asked all my friends about the book. None of them had read it. None of them had even heard of Frank Swinnerton.

In the lapse of six years, however, the veil has lifted. Now it is difficult to find a reader on whom one can flash the work of Mr. Swinnerton as a "discovery." He has many friends and correspondents on this side of the Atlantic. And by pricking up my ears when I happened into "literary circles," by begging glimpses of his letters, and by resorting to the meager data furnished by publishers, I was quite easily able to satisfy myself as to why Mr. Swinnerton stands out so sharply against the erotic homogeneity of the younger English writers. It is because he himself was one of the shackled young adventurers of the London suburbs. And the life he saw about him, petty, exacting, devoid of dra-

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matics, was the life he put into his books. That is why Great-aunt Eunice, missing her heroes and heroines, denounced him, and that is why he seems to me unique in his craft.

When I say that Mr. Swinnerton portrayed the life of which he himself was a product, I do not mean that his work is in any sense autobiographical. Certain facts about himself naturally, and about those with whom he associated, are reproduced in his books. "At fourteen," he writes, "I went to work as an office boy in circumstances similar to those in which Stephen Moore (*The Chaste Wife*) began. The previous years had been years of serious illness and starvation." Again he says: "The character of Amberley, in *On the Staircase*, is a sort of semi-self-portrait, but gilded for purposes of fictional interest. *The Happy Family* enshrines some memories of very early days and gives some of my publishing experience. *On the Staircase* holds this much of personal reminiscence that the flat in which the Grettons live at the top of the house in Great James Street is the flat in which my family lived for a couple of years."

These, however, are only incidents, and they are relieved and illumined, as is all Mr. Swinnerton's work, with imaginative insight and interpretative suggestion. According to one who knows him well, "Mr. Swinnerton thinks one should not narrate literally the events of one's own life in writing

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fiction, and he rarely adopts suggestions from real persons for his characters."

But those who are curious about the facts of the author's life need not dig out "the man behind the book" to find them. Mr. Swinnerton makes no mystery of them and they are not such as would stimulate sensation hunters. His is a story of success wrung from poverty, serious ill health, and unpropitious circumstance. He owes much to the interest of the friends whom his quiet, rather baffling personality never failed to win for him; but more he owes to his own ordered will which would always concentrate on the good ahead, no matter how distressing, and upsetting the details of material existence might be.

He was born in 1884, and from the first was up against the cruelties of London at its worst, but always through the sordidness and gloom a kindly star shone above his head. During his period as office boy his employers, recognizing the serious ambition of the thoughtful lad, encouraged him to use his spare time to write. In a few years, through the interest of a friend, he found his way into the office of J. M. Dent and Company, the publishers of the Temple Classics and the Everyman Library. Here, in the atmosphere of a scholarly house, he began his first novel. This book, finished at the age of eighteen, marks the beginning of a career which, though still so young, falls naturally into

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three periods. The first includes three novels that were never published; the second includes three novels that were published but not read; and the third includes a bevy of novels some of which have taken two continents by the ears.

But the work of the first period was not wasted, even though the fine script of its many, many hundred pages (I have seen a sample and it is the most beautiful handwriting in the world) was soon fed to hungry flames by the author. Young Swinnerton was busy all this time acquiring technique, learning how to develop in sharp black and white the impressions made on the highly sensitized film of his mind. It was a short tragedy written at this time that won for him the enthusiastic confidence of Mr. Philip Lee Warner, who soon asked Swinnerton to be proof manager for the firm of Chatto and Windus, in which he was a partner. Spurred by the congeniality of his work and his surroundings, the young man dedicated his evenings to writing. His first book, *The Merry Heart*, he bashfully submitted, at Mr. Warner's request, to the house, where, to avoid embarrassment, it was sent to an outside reader who had no knowledge of the author. Swinnerton received the notice of its acceptance on the occasion of his twenty-fourth birthday. What a birthday that was only those who have similarly striven can know. But the young author did not celebrate it with champagne. He went to work on

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another story. *The Young Idea* won from Arnold Bennett the cryptic comment that Swinnerton "knew his business so well that he didn't need anyone to show him his faults." Followed *The Casement*, and apropos of these three books of the second period, Floyd Dell, the first American critic to take notice of the young author, said that Swinnerton knew all there was to know about the young girl, and prophesied that he would do "bigger work."

The prophecy was speedily fulfilled, for the canvas of *The Happy Family* is as inclusive as the suburbs of London. But the book that won him his first real appreciation in literary England was his work on Gissing. All the various literary societies and fraternities began to "rush" him, and Wells invited him to his house. *On The Staircase* created a mild furore in London and won him the friendship of Arnold Bennett. A critical study of Robert Louis Stevenson done at this time earned Swinnerton his first enemies—not very vindictive ones, but very angry ones. Then came the war and an illness so long and serious that it almost put an end to this career so promisingly begun. But Swinnerton recovered and put all the ardor of his convalescence into *The Chaste Wife*. It is hard not to believe that Stephen Moore is a self-confession, so emotionally and unsparingly is this difficult, morose and tormented character drawn, but we must take the author's word for it that it is not. At all events,

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the critical opinions expressed by Stephen so impressed the editor of the *Manchester Guardian* that he immediately wrote to Swinnerton asking him to do literary work for this paper.

*Nocturne* was written in a period of the greatest domestic stress, illness, anxiety and loneliness. So great was the author's preoccupation that he had, as he says, no feeling but shame for the work he was so hurriedly producing. When, however, after its completion, his own publisher said "it's a masterpiece," and Arnold Bennett wrote, "A slight work, but just about perfect," and encomiums poured in from across the Atlantic, and requests for translation privileges from the other side of the channel, his spirits rose to a height they had achieved only once before in his life, and that was on the occasion of his twenty-fourth birthday. Then followed *Shops and Houses*, a study of suburban life, a novel which reveals Swinnerton's emotional power without sentimentality, in the sympathetic portrayal of youth in conflict with family traditions, petty small-town gossip and social tyranny defended by age.

Now he has just finished another book called *September*. This is a close study of feminine psychology. There are four principal characters, a man of about fifty, a woman of thirty-eight, a young man of five and twenty, and a girl of twenty-one. The emotional conflict between these characters, and particularly between the two women,



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is the theme of the story. The tale is divided into three books, each bearing the name of one of the characters.

Swinnerton is now editorial adviser for the firm of Chatto and Windus. He still continues to write literary criticisms for the *Manchester Guardian* and in spare moments is a professional dramatic critic. He contributes articles, short stories and plays to current English periodicals. Thus it will be seen that his days are very full. Some idea of his power of concentration may be got from the fact that *Nocturne* was written in six weeks less a fortnight, in which the story could not be made to progress beyond a scene on board the yacht; while *September* was written in four months. *Nocturne* has been translated into Dutch, Danish and Swedish.

Of his characters Mr. Swinnerton humorously comments: "They don't go down on their knees to me or interpose their own wills in any matter affecting their own future. They are real enough to exist apart from the things written down for them, but they cause no sleepless nights. Indeed, I have a scrupulous fancy and do the best I can for them!"





# FRANK SWINNERTON

*As Seen by an Editor*

By GRANT M. OVERTON

Editor, New York *Sun Book Review*

OF the five novels of Frank Swinnerton that I have seen, all are worthy of attentive reading by anyone who cares at all for contemporary fiction in England and America. The best of the five—they are, in order, *The Happy Family*, *On the Staircase*, *The Chaste Wife*, *Nocturne*, and *Shops and Houses*—is the superb *Nocturne*; but this book is a special feat and anyone acquainted with it is likely to feel the unfairness of involving other books in comparisons with it. Putting *Nocturne* to one side, on a pedestal not ranged with the others, the thing to notice is the steady lifting into eminence of Mr. Swinnerton's other books, in the order in which they have reached us. Each is a better performance than its predecessor. The superiority of *On the Staircase* over *The Happy Family* may not be remarkable, but *The Chaste Wife* marks an advance all can see, while *Shops and Houses*, comedy though it is, will give readers more satisfaction than *The Chaste Wife*, because it has more contact with the ordinary range of thought, feeling and observation.

We talk about romanticists and realists loosely, but I think it will be found that the business of a

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novelist ordinarily resolves itself into one of two broad tasks. Either he is going to take the improbable, the weird, the incredible and the bizarre and so present it to us that we can enter into it with the sense of "This *did* happen! I can see *how* he (or she) came to act thus and so!"—or our novelist is going to take a piece of everydayness and make us re-live it in the sense of how wonderful it all was. I suspect that the novelist who essays the first task is the one we call a "romanticist" and the writer who tackles the second is our "realist." Failures in the first enterprise are very likely as frequent as in the second; but they are neither as conspicuous nor as dismal. This is partly because our imaginations exert themselves to help the romantic writer while they lie sluggishly inert in the presence of the realist, waiting for him to rouse them from heavy torpor. Besides, it is only in the last half century, or a little more, that the realist (in the sense I have suggested) has been writing. Many Victorian minds still look upon him as an experimentalist engaged in a highly dubious enterprise.

Now of course Mr. Swinnerton is a realist in these terms. But you can't tag a writer as a "romanticist" or a "realist" and let it go at that. Most people would call Joseph Conrad a romanticist and be mainly right; but some of the most perfect realism in the world is in his *The Secret Agent*, and his *Chance* is full of it. Making the extraordinary

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real and making the commonplace wonderful are, properly considered, complementary enterprises of the story-teller. The episode of Jenny and the sailor Keith Redington in *Nocturne* is as romantic a piece of business as a novelist could have to deal with. The love affair of Jenny's sister, Emmy, and the utterly usual Alf is a particularly fine example of the commonplace made wonderful.

I think *Nocturne* is the most perfect work of imaginative sympathy I have ever read. I used to think, and perhaps I still think, that Mr. Conrad's *Youth* was the finest short story in English; but *Youth* is a "recapture," a beautiful moment of adorable recollection. *Nocturne* is not a remembered thing but an imagined thing. Frank Swinnerton has seen a shopgirl going home at dusk on a London tram car. He has, in his mind, gone with her, entered the house, looked upon the drudging Emmy and the bloated Pa. He has sat at supper with these three and has found it neither drab nor dull. Pathos and humor have disclosed their presence to him. And he has found just the right words. He is never satirical, never harsh, never sentimental; he is kindly, tolerant, understanding, just. He sees beauty and romance, and he makes you see them. It is incredible to me that anyone could read *Nocturne* and not be moved and comforted by it. Well! When you have written a book of which *that* can be said, the world owes you something!



BOOKS BY  
FRANK SWINNERTON

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*Description and Comment*

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SEPTEMBER

ACCORDING to custom the Howard Forsters have come down to their quiet country place at the beginning of summer. Marian Forster, in her late thirties still wonderfully young, turns her mind wearily to the future; Howard, over fifty, over fed, pathetically foolish in the pursuit of the pleasures of youth has ceased to count; within herself she feels alone, without any special interest in what is to come. Then two things happen: she meets Nigel Sinclair, and Cherry Mant's mother sends Cherry to visit Marian. With Nigel, Marian experiences a swift, delightful understanding. She is fascinated with trying to understand Cherry, beautiful, undeveloped, strangely sophisticated, subtly perverse, immediately hostile to Marian, envious of her mature calm. Cherry's relations with Howard, Marian's brief poignant happiness in Nigel's love, and, back in town in September, her loss of him to Cherry's triumphant youth, make up a tale of the passionate conflict of two strongly contrasted temperaments. Nothing Mr. Swinnerton has done is so finely penetrating as the friendship and the conflict between these two women. Over and above the story, wonderfully sustained, informing the

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whole so that it becomes as one event, broods the mood of September, the autumnal quality in Marian's life.

"It is indeed, a very able book. With candor and sincerity Mr. Swinnerton has applied his brain to a very difficult task. The development is original, has an unusual air of truth. Marian Forster's figure is finely logically outlined. Her spoils from the contest are neither romantic nor showy. Among modern novelists very few would choose to make the fruit of the contest something so quiet. Few would plan their story so consistently with that end in view. We have read with the conviction that we are being asked to attend to a problem worth solving—a conviction so rare as by itself to prove that *SEPTEMBER* is a novel of exceptional merit."—*London Times Literary Supplement*.

### SHOPS AND HOUSES

WITH the indignation of youth against the instinct of oppression as its theme, this is an absorbing story of modern life in an English suburban town, near enough to London to be the home of city men. It is an exquisitely humorous picture of small-town snobbishness. A black-sheep of one of the 'first families' has the effrontery to return and set up as a grocer in Beckwith itself! The solution here of the exciting tangle wrought is through love. And even Mr. Swinnerton has never

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been happier than in his portrayal of Louis Vechantors, of Dorothy and of Veronica—and of the town gossip, Miss Lampe. "One marvels at the extraordinary acuteness of it all."—*London Bookman*.

"A bright study in fiction of suburban town life—while even the most masterly portrayal of small town types may leave the sympathy chilled and inert, or transformed into vexed impatience, no such fate could befall such a rarely artistic disclosure of loyalty and courage and pure passion as Mr. Swinnerton's narrative of the triumph of true love over all obstacles of shops and houses."—*Philadelphia North American*.

"An exquisitely humorous picture of small town snobbishness."—*San Francisco Chronicle*.

"The book is, of course, admirably written. Mr. Swinnerton knows a good deal about human nature, and he sets forth his knowledge with many admirable and illuminating little touches."—*New York Times*.

"The day after finishing *Shops and Houses* you are likely to chuckle at every one concerned, yourself included. You are equally likely to wait with impatience for the author's next."—*New York Sun*.

## NOCTURNE

NOCTURNE is only a tale of the million commonplace loves of a million commonplace people in which, as humanity's great heart



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well knows, there is little that is either supremely elevating or meanly sordid.

With a few touches less assured, or a single situation vulgarized or even overwrought, Mr. Swinnerton's story would have fallen in ruins. That he has been gifted with power to portray low life without crassness, and artistically to suggest the pathetic yearnings of the lowly for joys of life they can never attain, nor even understand, is sufficient warrant of primacy in a new, exigent school of fiction which creates beauty out of sheer fidelity of vision, with almost artless verity of description and characterization.—*Philadelphia North American*.

"This is a book that will not die. It is perfect, authentic, and alive. If Mr. Swinnerton were never to write another word, I think he might count on this much of his work living when many of the more important reputations of today may have served their purpose in the world and become no more than fading names. Mr. Swinnerton has written four or five other novels before this one, but none of them compares with it in quality."—*H. G. Wells*.

"Humor and romance. What could be more romantic than Jenny's adventure that night? Beauty. Not a beauty of surroundings, though Jenny found herself in enchanting surroundings, but the beauty of a great love and a sword-sharp jealousy guard-



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ing it. Pathos in the figure of Pa and the relation of his girls to him. And always the right word. Infallibly the right word, never satirical, never harsh, never sentimental; kindly, tolerant, understanding, just. If this is what you mean by realism, read *Nocturne* and be moved and comforted by it.”  
—*New York Sun*.

“If to write such a book as *Nocturne* is not to write a great book, then what is?”—*Los Angeles Times*.

“Mr. Swinnerton demands no alteration and sues for no reforms. Mentally he is an aristocrat if there ever was one.”—*The New York Evening Post*.

### THE HAPPY FAMILY

THE HAPPY FAMILY is a realistic comedy of life in London suburbs. The scenes are laid principally in Kentish Town, with excursions to Hampstead, Highgate, and Gospel Oak; while unusual pictures of the publishing trade form a setting to the highly important office-life of the chief male characters. The book shows these individuals both at work and at play, and endeavors to suggest something of the real life of a class which is very rarely treated in fiction. While it is thus a sympathetic and veracious study, however, *The Happy Family* is concerned with people rather than problems; for against the background of suburban

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and office-life it shows the courageous figures of a girl and a young man, both with their own battles to fight, emerging at length into freedom and happiness. Although parts of the book are pathetic, and even tragic, its tone throughout is optimistic; and it resembles the author's previous work in the qualities of freshness and humor.

"For clever, even brilliant analysis of character and description of unconsidered details of family and social life, Mr. Swinnerton must take high rank, and these qualities give his book much merit."  
—*Boston Globe*.

"His style is controlled, ironic, sometimes vivid, always unemotional. The novel commands attention as a production of exceptional ability and intelligence."—*New York Times*.

"He displays the Amerson family with numerous of its branches as easily as another writer would conduct a tête à tête. He knows a hundred families like the Amersons. He knows the women as well as the men, the typists as well as the clerks, and he reproduces them with honest art."—*Chicago Evening News*.

"People who do not like to read about 'sordid and commonplace' people (that is, themselves and their neighbors) are warned to eschew Mr. Swinnerton's book, and also Balzac and some other men

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of reputed talent. But those of firmer vision and more flexible sympathy will find in *The Happy Family* some very great qualities, candor, sanity, right-thinking, and fundamental humor."—*Boston Herald*.

### THE CHASTE WIFE

MARRIAGE or happiness—or both! Mr. Swinnerton, whose frank realism has often been compared to that of Gissing, finds the secret in a single word: Truth. Priscilla Evandene was happy, though Stephen earned a small pittance. Love, and utter confidence, kept her happy. But Stephen had to have his secret, as so many men do. And when Priscilla's confidence deserted her, love threatened to go, too! The whole perplexing problem of marital felicity is stripped of its wrappings in this tale of love's triumph over a man's mistaken idea of "kindness to his wife."

"It is quite unlike modern novels in that it is fine and brave and big. Mr. Swinnerton is to be congratulated on having written a novel that is something more than just good, and that should outlast the 'season.'"—*Chicago Evening Post*.

"*The Chaste Wife* is a story of marriage written with sobriety and keen insight. . . . Character is cleanly drawn and sanely developed and there is no fumbling in this story."—*Boston Herald*.

"Frank Swinnerton's *The Chaste Wife* is the

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story of a poor book reviewer so foolhardy as to get married."—*The Globe*.

"*The Chaste Wife* is admirably conceived and finished. Through the window the author throws open for us we look in upon the lives and thoughts of a group of people, all real, and most of them likable, whom we watch with interest, and of whose further experiences, after the last chapter is reached and the window closed, we would like to be told."—*New York Times*.

"*The Chaste Wife* will widen Frank Swinnerton's public; it is written, moreover, with sparkle and polish and suggests that the author really loves his work."—*Chicago Herald*.

"Reading Mr. Swinnerton's story is like coming into the sunshine and fresh air after a long, stifling period in a dark, poorly ventilated building. The delicate accuracy with which he distinguishes his characters is done so easily that we have no immediate thought of how high a degree of art is required for such perfection of outline."—*Boston Evening Transcript*.

### ON THE STAIRCASE

YOU do not meet life singly, as an individual, no matter what the ordinary novels say!

The unit of life is the family. The family's personality determines each member.

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Frank Swinnerton is one of the few writers who realize that fact. He writes with cynical humor, genial sympathy, distinguished realism. He here chronicles two families, a cramped menage, and a well-rounded, cheerful household—gay father, a talkative mother, a girl who works, and her brother, who teases, and her suitors, who yearn.

Delightful is the incidental romance of Susan, that motherly young person who expected to be an old maid, but amazingly found herself the center of an idyll.

"Its narrative comes to close grips with life."—*New York Evening Post*.

"In defiance of all claims of the individualists, Mr. Swinnerton hymns the family. *On the Staircase* is the picture of two groups, Barbara Gretton and her household, gay, quarrelsome, affectionate, independent, and Adrian Velancourt and Cissie, his wife—inevitable tragedy is here and Swinnerton handles it with sureness and delicacy—but he is not afraid of amusing observation and bright humor and good cheer."—*New York Times*.

"*On the Staircase* is an entrancing novel of the experiences, adventures, emotions of a little group of ordinary young people. . . . It is a living story."—*The Independent*.

"*On the Staircase* is a delightful novel. The praise it has received from London critics is deserved."—*Boston Herald*.





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